

GROWTH OF THE GOSPEL.

A SERMON

DELIVERED BY

REV. V. G. WHEELOCK

OF WOLCOTT, VT.,

IN STANBRIDGE, P. Q.

ALSO, A LETTER TO A METHODIST MINISTER,

AT STANBRIDGE, P. Q.,

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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JOURNAL STEAM PRINTING ESTABLISHMENT.
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PRICE, FIFTEEN CENTS.



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“BUT THE WORD OF GOD GREW AND MULTIPLIED.”—Acts xii: 24.

IN reading the preceding context we are informed that a violent persecution raged against Christianity under the favor of Herod, who had stretched forth his hand to annoy the church; and who slew James the brother of John, and confined Peter in prison.

This is made plain. The account is there set forth of the death of this impious and desperately wicked man, who gave not God the glory. But notwithstanding an attempt to overthrow Christianity, it stood firm, and will forever stand, let mountains come against it. “The word of God grew and multiplied.”

When we rationally and reasonably take into consideration the nature, spirit and tendency of Christianity, that it was every way designed to instruct, to be the source of rich and pure consolation to the world, to bind up the broken-hearted, to comfort the mourner, to reconcile men to God and to one another, we can look at the subject of persecution with no feelings other than the utmost astonishment.

But the opposition which has taken place against the word of God, clearly shows the corruption, blindness and wickedness of the world, and testifies that a large proportion of the people very much lack humility of heart, and true Christian devotion. Their hearts are far from God, from righteousness and truth. The Jews blindly rejected the word of peace—refused the kingdom of grace—condemned the gospel and put Jesus Christ to death. And Herod, for the purpose of showing the Jews a favor, put forth his hand, and by persecuting the followers of Christ, attempted to destroy his cause.

But let us for a moment look at the consequences which attended this opposition to the growth of the word of God. The Jews

filled up the measure of their iniquity, and fell by an exceedingly severe judgment. And Herod was also visited for his corruption and wickedness, and miserably perished from the earth. Such were the consequences which have befallen the Jews for their great wickedness.

But the word of God wonderfully increased and multiplied. Human council can do nothing when engaged to defeat the purpose or overthrow the doings of Almighty God. That Being who bade the planets roll, will never suffer defeat. His purposes must stand and His work go onward. It was well said by one anciently to his persecuting brethren who were opposing the preaching of the word of God, when he said, "for if this counsel be of men, it will come to naught ; but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it."

Now, those which are in the life and power of the Christian religion, in the midst of affliction and under every calamity, they then can see the kingdom of heaven, which is resembled to a grain of mustard seed, growing, increasing and becoming a mighty tree, whose branches are spreading and filling the whole earth ; and the fowls of the air feeding upon the delicious fruit which grows from its branches—its leaves are for the healing of the nations. In short, this tree is the tree of life.

Now in a natural sense, trees upon the banks of rivers are considered the product or effect of the fertilizing nature of the waters : so in a spiritual sense. It will be borne in mind by all who are careful readers of the Scriptures, that when Adam transgressed in the garden of Eden by eating of the forbidden fruit, God drove him out from thence, lest he should put forth his hand and take of the tree of life. And he placed at the east end of the garden of Eden a flaming sword, which turned every way to keep the way of the tree of life. This tree of life, from which the sword of justice has so long separated man, was by reason of his own individual transgressions.

But we have abundant reason to thank God that all may have free access to this tree. It may be asked by some, what became of Adam after he sinned in the garden. To such an inquiry we would answer : he returned again to the ground from which he was taken. Adam and Eve lived a great number of years after they transgressed, and we have no account of their ever living

vicious lives. And justice did not demand endless suffering for them in another world, nor any part of mankind, but that they should undergo disciplinary punishment. Every man shall be rewarded according to his works.

By this, we learn that it is in the love of God alone, that we may expect the cause of Christianity will prosper. A tree in the natural world, has various branches—these branches have other or lesser branches or twigs—these twigs have fibers, these fibers have leaves or fruit, but they all draw their nutriment from the same trunk or common stock.

So, in the same relation, this tree, which spiritually represents the gospel or Christianity, has its different branches. The branches signify the various branches of the Christian church—the twigs the different denominations of professing Christians—the fibers the individuals of those denominations, and the fruit and leaves, the virtues and graces of individual Christians. And “the word of God that grew and multiplied” is the same as the gospel.

We can but say, Roll on, blessed religion! increase, O mighty and glorious truth, and fill the whole earth with the salvation of God, and by thy genial and celestial influence make the wilderness blossom like the rose!

The primitive preachers suffered much persecution, were imprisoned and put to death. But notwithstanding all this, the gospel went forward gloriously. Even in the midst of the storm and whirlwind of persecution, “the word of God grew and multiplied.” Notwithstanding the High Priests, Priests, Scribes, Pharisees and Elders ascribed the miracles of Christ and the Apostles to demoniacal agency, yet the glorious gospel spread far and wide. It increased daily—became more diffused—converts to the faith were rising on every side, and multitudes were gathering into the fold of the great Shepherd with joy and gladness.

Since the days of John Murray, Elhanan Winchester, Hosea Ballou and other faithful worthies, who have gone to another and a better world, Universalism has grown rapidly. “The word of God grew and multiplied.” There has been and is much being done for the cause of education in our ranks. This is excellent in its place, but it should not be considered the only one thing needful. The one thing needful is a pure Christian life.

I can but now say, my hope of the future rests on the grace of God, and also on His word of promise, through faith and repentance, that I may be enabled to be conformed to the image of His Son. I find it to be a precious hope to my soul in my now failing state of health.

"In this mountain, the kingdom of Christ, shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory ; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces ; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth, for the Lord hath spoken it."

The covering and veil are to be destroyed from over all people ; death shall be swallowed up in victory, implying the certainty of an universal resurrection ; plainly showing that all suffering shall come to an end.

The glorious promise made by God to Abraham is, "That in him and in his seed, Christ, shall all the families, nations and kindreds of the earth be blessed." Now, every soul on the face of the whole earth, is included in this promise. The promise is this : "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." That is, the same "all" that die in Adam, or the earthly man, the same all shall be made alive in Christ the heavenly man. The blessing which was promised is this : that Christ should come and "turn every one of them from their iniquities." "He must reign till all enemies are put under his feet." "The last enemy, death, shall be destroyed." "He will finish sin, make an end of transgression and reconcile the world unto himself." This word of God, this gospel, increased and spread far and wide. The inspired heralds of the cross did not labor in vain. The storm of persecution in which they were involved, carried the word they delivered on its thousand wings and scattered it among the distressed nations. In this manner the all-wise, just and merciful God caused man to praise and adore Him, and converted human opposition to his use, making it subservient to the spread of His glorious truth.

The doctrine which the Apostles preached is resembled to seed which falls from the hand of the sower. Here we have a beauti-

ful allusion to the powers of vegetation. It grew like corn — first the blade — it multiplied like the corn in the full ear. Our Savior, in the gospel according to St. Matthew, Chap. xiii, compares the preaching of the gospel to the sowing of seed. He resembles himself to a sower who went forth to sow : the seed was the word of God or doctrine of the kingdom — the field was the world.

Thus the Apostles sowed the word of God, and notwithstanding the immense corruption and barrenness of the soil, it took root, grew and multiplied. There was nothing that could possibly prevent its growth, for God moistened it with the dew from heaven.

The happiness of every intelligent being consists in knowing and serving God. And there is no way that man can possibly arrive to this knowledge, only through the gospel of peace and love. And if it be desirable that man should be happy, which it is highly so, it is desirable that the word of God should grow and multiply. It becomes necessary that it should increase. In proportion as the word of God prevails, the happiness of man is increased.

It changes the complexion of society — it puts to an end vices and follies which are common in the world. All these vices would reign without it, and which do reign where the word of God has not been proclaimed. There is nothing but the word of God that can resist the torrent of corruption. And the testimony contained in the word of God shows that men are brethren, whose duty it is to love one another. In its onward march, it may perhaps meet with opposition from the false gods of this world, it may suffer much in a temporary point of view, yet, it must and will prevail. It must and will stand, let what will come against it. From the least of seeds, it will when grown become a mighty tree, uniting in its branches all the families, nations and kindred of the earth. Though the stream be now small, it will increase and be multiplied, and become an everflowing scourge, which shall sweep falsehood and wickedness from the earth. Like the stone cut out of the mountain, it will roll on, till it fills the whole earth with glory. The word of God shall not return void ; it will sanctify and redeem all men.

My Christian friends, in conclusion, permit me to say to you, do all that in you lies, to the growth and spread of the gospel of peace and love.

LETTER
TO
A METHODIST MINISTER,
OF STANBRIDGE, P. Q.

DEAR SIR :—My only apology in addressing you in this public manner is, that I am an earnest seeker after truth and have a desire that it may prevail among the people ; and be assured I have no other than the best feelings towards you personally.

I had an appointment at Bedford, Sunday, June 4th, and you had one there immediately after mine. In my sermon on “The rich man and Lazarus,” a part of which you heard, I endeavored to show, in as clear a manner as possible, that it was beyond all reasonable doubt a parabolic representation of the degradation and misery into which the Jewish nation fell, the rich man representing the Jews, as a people, and Lazarus, the heathens, publicans and sinners ; also that the word *hell* in the text is the translation of the Greek *hades*, but used here not in its primitive and radical, but in its secondary, metaphorical, accommodated sense, for a state of depression, disgrace, destruction, and did not imply that the heathen notions from which the imagery was borrowed, were correct, nor tend in any degree to prove the doctrine of future punishment for any of mankind. This position of mine you controverted in your sermon, and said that *hades* was to be taken in a literal sense, and you stated to your congregation that Universalists were in an error in calling the passage a parable. All this was merely your *ipse dixit*, without proof or any attempt at proof.

But suppose the passage is to be taken literally, as you contend, what follows ? Why, that a certain rich man went to hell, a place of torment, after his death, because he was rich in this life, and a certain beggar went to heaven, a place of happiness, after his death, because he was poor in this world. For we have no account that this man had any other qualification for heaven except his poverty ; nor that the rich man labored under any disqualification except his riches. We have no account of his being immoral or unjust, but only that he was rich and fared sumptuously every day.

I hold such an exposition of the text to be very incorrect, manifestly, demonstrably so ; its absurdity must strike every candid mind upon a moment's reflection. But allow the rich man to stand as a representative of the unbelieving Jewish nation, soon to be cast down from their high estate to the very grave of their national glory, from their privileged, prerogative condition to the lowest depression and contempt, to be stripped of their purple and fine linen and turned into the abyss (*hades* means abyss) of national degradation and torment ; and on the other hand, allow Lazarus to represent the heathen world, which had been hitherto poor in respect to their religious advantages, and shut out from the light and knowledge of divine revelation, and that the figures, the parabolic imagery, the costume of the passage, were drawn from the prevalent heathen mythology, and all becomes clear ; at any rate, in no way incongruous or incredible. Now had the Savior entertained the ideas of the heathen in regard to *hades* and its different apartments, he would hardly have signified this correctness in a parable only, but would very surely have given us some direct, positive ratification of those ideas, and in some other than a parabolic, superstitious form.

You, my dear sir, know, or should know that the word hell, in the text, is from *hades*, which is found in the New Testament eleven times, and rendered ten times hell and once grave, but the radical, primary signification of the word is the unseen, hidden state, the state of death, without any necessary reference to the place of deposit of the body. In Luke xvi, 19-31 the word denotes, as I think can be shown beyond all reasonable doubt, the degradation and misery into which the Jewish nation fell, in its pride and arrogance, its external wealth and grandeur, its pomp-

ous ritual worship and exalted religious privileges, all of which could not avail to save them from the outcast condition in which they found themselves when the fullness of time had come for God to show mercy to the Gentiles. In Acts ii, 27-28 the same original word is used to designate the place or state of death, as it is manifest to every reader, because it is implied that the soul or person of Christ had been in hell, though he did not remain there. The Lord Jesus was in *hades*, that is the grave, or state of death, but nobody supposes he went into a place of punishment or torment. Yet this is what you virtually asserted in your sermon, when you declared that hell meant a place of endless suffering wherever it is used in the Scriptures. In Matt. xvi, 18, it is said the gates of hell (*hades*) shall not prevail against the church of Christ, where we have a metaphorical application of the word, to denote the power of opposition, the influence of falsehood, of evil, of sin, in all their manifold forms which might assail the truth and its advocates, yet the church should survive all assaults and all opposition, gain a complete victory over all its foes. And in Rev. i, 8, we are told that Jesus has the keys of hell and death; but that he has the keys of a place of endless torment, would be a most wanton and absurd assumption. But Jesus truly has the keys of death and the grave, and he must reign till all enemies are put under his feet. He therefore can with propriety, and did in fact, enter into the dominion of death and the grave, "that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, and deliver them, who, through the fear of death, were all their life-time subject to bondage." (Heb. ii, 14-15).

Doddridge (on Rev. i, 18), says "*hades* is obscure, dark and invisible; the invisible receptacle or mansion of the dead in general." Our English word hell, in its primary signification, though now commonly understood in a more limited sense, exactly answers to the Greek word *hades*, and denotes a concealed or unseen place, and this sense of the word is still retained in the eastern, and more especially in the western counties of England, where to *hele* over a thing, is to cover it. Dr. Campbell also says that "as to the word *hades*, which occurs in eleven places in the New Testament, and is rendered hell in all except one, where it is translated grave, it is quite common in the classical authors and

frequently used by the Seventy in their translation of the Old Testament. In my judgment," he says, "it ought never, in Scripture, to be rendered hell, at least in the sense wherein that word is universally understood by Christians," [meaning, of course, in his age and country.] "The word hell in its primitive signification denoted only what was secret or concealed." To the same purpose, with substantial unity, and no important discrepancy, are the testimonies of Donnegan's Lexicon and Dr. Adam Clarke's Commentary. And these concessions, coming from men of distinguished learning and unquestionable orthodoxy, as well as true piety, should satisfy every candid mind that the Hebrew word *Sheol* in the Old Testament, and the corresponding Greek word *hades* in the New, which it is admitted on all hands are synonymous terms, have been generally and very greatly misunderstood, and misapplied when they have been made to denote the place of endless misery of the Calvinistic theology. Their metaphorical and secondary use is not to be sought alone in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In Matt. xi, 23, we have an instance of such use, where Christ says that Capernaum should be brought down to hell, i. e. should be destroyed, or should be abased. And in Luke x, 15, Christ says it should be thrust down to hell, which is to the same effect very obviously, denoting the desolation and destruction of the city. Dr. Adam Clarke says very justly that "the word here means the state of utmost woe and ruin and desolation to which those impenitent cities should be reduced. This prediction of our Lord was fulfilled; for in the wars between the Romans and the Jews, these cities were totally destroyed, so that no traces are now found of Bethsaida, Chorazin or Capernaum."

David says, "Great is Thy mercy to me, and Thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell." Is there a hell lower than the lowest? Surely, sir, you will not pretend to say so. Jonah says, "I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and Thou heardest my voice." Now you will not claim that David and Jonah were in the future state when they uttered these expressions, and in a place of endless suffering for the wicked, as you asserted and aimed to show in your sermon. No, most assuredly you cannot commit yourself to such a proposition, neither can you with any more propriety or warrant of

holy writ turn the imagery of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus into the support of the doctrine of endless torments. The parable refuses, on any tenable ground of Scripture exposition, to be turned to any such purpose, or to teach and bolster up any such superstition. Now, my dear sir, as you have the confidence of your people in your ability as a religious teacher, as a Methodist minister in good standing, you will please receive this epistle in the same kind and Christian spirit in which I write it, and show if you are able wherein it is not according to the divine law and testimony.

Very truly yours,

V. G. WHEELLOCK.

